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ABSTRACT

This project investigated the possible causes of and solutions to the reticence of many Japanese students attending General English courses at the University of Edinburgh Institute for Applied Language Studies (Scotland). It was suspected that students' reticence affected their rate of learning and personal improvement as well as the general dynamics of the multi-national classes they attended. Information was gathered in extensive guided, open-end question interviews for over 2 years; 19 students were interviewed intensely. Results suggest that certain socio-cultural factors were significant causes of reticence while activities involving an element of duty to others might encourage Japanese learners to speak more openly. Usefulness and coercion were found to be the two main concerns of students. It was also found that many Japanese students themselves did not feel that speaking was a priority, although it did appear to be a priority for their teachers, suggesting that perhaps the teachers need to adapt to more silence in the Speaking class. Suggestions for encouraging more speaking include role-playing, explicit requests to speak by the teacher, additional reading skills development, coercive-type activities that require speaking, and changing teacher expectations of students and self. (Contains 16 references.) (NAV)

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Eileen Dwyer and Anne Heller-Murphy (IALS)

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JAPANESE LEARNERS IN SPEAKING CLASSES

Eileen Dwyer and Anne Heller-Murphy (IALS)

Abstract

This project was undertaken to investigate possible causes of and solutions to the reticence of many of the Japanese students attending General English courses at the Institute for Applied Language Studies of the University of Edinburgh. The issue was considered important because of the suspected effect of this reticence not only on the rate of learning and improvement of the Japanese students themselves, but also on the dynamics of the multi-national classes which they attend. Information was gathered in extensive guided interviews over two years. Results suggest that certain socio-cultural factors are significant causes of reticence, and that - possibly as a result of these factors - activities involving an element of duty to others may encourage Japanese learners to speak. We also speculate, however, that problems may be over-estimated as a result of teachers' anxiety about their role.

1. Introduction

The exploratory investigation reported here was prompted by concern among staff at the Institute for Applied Language Studies (IALS) that their Japanese students were too silent in class. The two researchers have worked at IALS for a number of years both as teachers and directors of courses involving Japanese students. The Japanese students who come to IALS, apart from those who come on short summer courses, stay at least three months, many as long as a year; we had observed that in a number of cases the students, while diligent, seemed unable or unwilling - or perhaps both - to speak in class. How they fared outside of the classroom was less clear, but it was their silence in the classroom that raised concerns, especially in those classes called 'Fluency' (now renamed 'Speaking') in the General English programme, which are attended by all of the Japanese students enrolled at the Institute during the period October to June. Some of then are enrolled full-time on General English; others are on a one-semester programme as part of their studies at a Japanese university and attend only Speaking classes in the General English programme. These classes are 5 hours of a 20-hour-per-week course. A few students had themselves voiced dissatisfaction - or frustration - (either through routine end-of-course questionnaires or anecdotally) at their own perceived lack of progress in speaking.

We were both concerned about the Japanese students themselves, and about the possible effect of their lesser participation on other students (from Europe, South America, East Asia and Arab countries).

We therefore decided to explore the attitudes of the Japanese learners themselves to the kind of activities/tasks they are asked to participate in in Speaking classes, in particular whether they have any marked preferences/dislikes which might inform our teaching to the increased satisfaction of themselves, other students, and teachers.

2. Selective literature review

The nature of English teaching in the Japanese public education system is indicated in works such as Hayes (1979) and Hino (1988) (whose account is corroborated by students at and visiting professors to IALS). Students in English classes are rarely called on to speak. The guidelines of the Ministry of Education quoted in Hayes (op.cit.: 365) state that 'All students at the beginning of their middle school years shall be familiarized with the phonology of a foreign language: the basic language skills to be taught are hearing and speaking'. However, the senior high schools and universities control their own entrance examinations, and because the English part of the entrance exam is usually grammar/translation, grammar/translation is what the schools usually teach (Hayes, op.cit.: 371). The *yakudoku* system of language learning requires the word-for-word translation of an L2 text from L2 to L1, followed by the rearrangement of the word-for-word L1 translation into appropriate L1 word order (Hino:46). The dominance of this traditional system in foreign language learning in Japan is often identified with the goal of studying English itself (op.cit.:47). It is further

the case that the teachers, in both schools and universities, may themselves be untrained to meet the goals of the ministry.

Speaking English may not be a necessary skill for many people in Japan, so the grammar-translation method may be suitable for the compulsory teaching of English as an academic subject (and it is almost universally compulsory (Hayes, op.cit.:365)). As IALS staff, however, we have so far seen our task as helping those Japanese students who have come here, and our assumption has been that, whatever their past experiences, they want to talk here. Students when they arrive here from the Japanese system may often know a great deal *about* English - if they are to become successful speakers, they need both to activate that passive knowledge and acquire the appropriate socio-linguistic rules to mould it (Ellis 1991).

The importance of the socio-pragmatic has been discussed in many articles, of which only a few will be dealt with here. Okushi (1990:69) claims, for example, that in Japan one avoids self-praise by rejecting or contradicting compliments; in the US or the UK, they may be accepted. Further, if societal rules in Japan dictate that it is socially correct to defer to others in conversation, neither seizing the initiative nor interrupting, then it would be unrealistic to expect students to overcome such behaviour without explicit training. If we fail to teach interactional/social rules to our Japanese students, and they then remain silent in class, the fault is surely ours, not theirs. It must also be borne in mind that Japanese students are unlikely to have been exposed to English spoken at conversational native-speaker speed or to have heard other L2 users. If they do not speak, it may be that they do not understand, not that they are unwilling (Maher 1984:48). Powney et al. (1995) conclude that the Japanese schoolchildren they observed speaking very little in Lothian Region schools in Scotland appeared to be in a transitional phase where listening and observing were more important to them than speaking.

A further difficulty facing Japanese students in multi-lingual classes is that, as Berwick (1975: 284) states they are "...not normally exposed to the fairly aggressive 'truth seeking exchanges' characteristic of the American secondary and college classroom" - and characteristic also of classroom exchanges of some of the students whom the Japanese encounter in a classroom here. The 'rigid and demoralizing learning situation in their high-school years' (Kobayashi et al. 1992: 8) may have a lasting negative effect on their classroom behaviour. 'The teacher, the text book, the goal of passing entrance exams were the determinants of methodology' (op.cit.). 'The Japanese education system does not seem to value independence nor assign creative or imaginative tasks.....students are expected to be passive.' (Hyland 1993: 73).

The learners' problems addressed in our research may also be seen as fitting largely within the area of cross-cultural learning styles. There is a large body of research in this area, of which O'Brien (1985) and Sato (1986) are especially worthy of mention. We quote from these in the **Suggestions** section below. A recent survey of the field, published after our research was completed, is Oxford and Anderson (1995). They note that Japanese students 'want to avoid embarrassment and maintain privacy' (p.207); '...though reflective themselves, often want rapid and constant correction from the teacher and do not feel comfortable with multiple correct answers' (p.208); '...dislike ...overt displays of opinions or emotions...' (Harshberger et al., quoted in Oxford and Anderson: 208); '...are often quiet, shy and reticent in language classrooms... may appear to be indecisive.' (Cheung, quoted in Oxford and Anderson:209).

3. The nature of the investigation

The investigation was carried out in two phases. First a preliminary informal questionnaire was distributed to Japanese students at IALS to identify issues to be raised in the subsequent investigation. Six of these students then also discussed their experiences at IALS informally in Japanese with a Japanese colleague who subsequently reported what they had said to us in English. For reasons of space, this preliminary study is reported here below only very briefly.

- The majority of the students said they had hardly spoken English and hardly heard spoken English before they came here in spite of years of formal study of English, although this was not necessarily a source of dissatisfaction to them.

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- There seemed to be no marked preference for mono- or multi-lingual classes.

- Embarrassment seemed to be a key inhibiting factor, in both mono- and multi-lingual classes. 'Teacher will find mistakes...' 'I have no confidence...' 'I'm afraid other Japanese will laugh at me later...' 'Other people in the class (non-Japanese) don't understand me...' 'I sometimes say something not the point'

- Japanese social/cultural behavioural norms were a limiting factor in an English-speaking environment (e.g. deference to others, a desire not to prevent another from speaking). 'Among Japanese students it is very rude to speak to show how much you know, or how much you can speak. In Japanese culture, consider[ing] others is a virtue'.

We decided that the main phase of the investigation (Phase 2) should involve semi-structured interviews with 20 Japanese students enrolled at IALS, to ask them their opinions about the classroom activities used at the Institute to promote speaking, and about those other factors - linguistic or extra-linguistic - which could adversely affect their participation in speaking activities.

The interviews were in fact carried out with 19 students, 12 from a group similar to the one mentioned above who were enrolled on the General English Year Round course. All of them had been at IALS for several months at the time of the interviews. We felt that students from any country would naturally be more concerned about spoken English immediately after their arrival in this country and that the data would be more revealing if obtained from students who had been here long enough to overcome any initial culture shock. The interviews were conducted one-to-one in a quiet room at IALS and lasted between forty-five minutes and one hour.

Responses were recorded manually and if necessary summarised during the interviews, although every attempt was be made to record students' actual utterances where possible. (Time constraints made analysis of audio-recorded material impracticable.) As two people were to carry out interviews with subjects separately (i.e. each interviewer would interview half the participants), two pilot interviews were carried out by both of the interviewers together to try to standardise recording of information. The interview schedule in the appendix has been reduced for reasons of space; the schedule used was physically larger, and a considerable amount of space was available for 'comments', i.e. students' own words.

4. Selected frequent and instructive/revealing answers

We now list (selected) questions as they appeared and summarise the most frequent answers and other selected answers.

Because of the open-ended nature of some of the questions, there may be only small numbers for any particular response. Numbers in brackets indicate the number of responses. Where no number is given, this indicates great variation either in substance or expression.

How old were you when you started to learn English?
13 (19)

Did you speak much English in Japan?
Hardly at all (19), even those who attend private conversation classes or studied English at University.
They had learned grammar to pass exams, and translated.

Why did you decide to come to Edinburgh?
To go abroad (8)
To experience new methods and the content of the course (3)

How important is speaking to you, compared with listening, reading and writing?
It is the most important of the skills (8).
Other replies were very varied but many said or implied that the other skills were more important. Several commented that priorities here and in Japan are different, particularly if you are proposing to be a teacher, as some of the respondents were. At present, they said, speaking is not considered at all important for teachers, although school curriculum modifications in the mid-1990s may change this.

How much do you think your spoken English has improved here?
a little (2 on our scale) (7)
some (3 on our scale) (8)

What has helped your speaking improve? (even if improvement was small)
Socialising (9)
Speaking to their host family (6)
Classes at IALS (2)

What do you think has prevented you from improving?
Answers to this question were very varied but might be summarised as:
personal reasons - inhibitions, fear of public failure, lack of confidence, spending too much time with other Japanese students talking Japanese; linguistic reasons - poor grammar, poor listening, poor vocabulary, inability to make non-Japanese students understand, inability to keep up with native speakers.

What did you do to improve your speaking?
There was no frequent answer to this question and most of the answers involved social activities away from the Institute.
Went to the language laboratory (5) (the most frequent individual answer)
I told my host family I wanted to speak a lot (2)
I spoke to native speakers (2)
I watched TV (2)
I spoke to other foreigners in English (2)
Nothing (2)

We have doubts about some of these answers - it may be that events such as 'watched TV' were given as answers to this question simply to provide an answer.

Were there any classroom activities/tasks which you particularly (dis)liked or found useful for speaking?

Most popular (i.e. more than 10 respondents gave these activities maximum 5 scores in both areas):

a. Seminars

Although mentioned specifically only by one student in 'what helped your speaking improve', seminars were given a maximum score of 5 in both areas by all of those students who participated in them. In these weekly seminars, the students in a mono-lingual class discuss aspects of a work of literature which they have been studying. They are given class time the previous day to prepare in pairs. Each member of a seminar has 15 minutes in which to speak and answer questions. The teacher takes no part unless asked by the chairperson.

The reason for the popularity of the seminars seemed to be in the *coercive* element involved in seminar presentation - they must speak. Interviewees made comments like the following 'The Japanese will speak when they must'; 'Being forced to speak is good'; 'Japanese like to be told exactly what to do'; pilot questionnaire respondents had spoken of their reluctance to speak because of their reluctance to inconvenience others.

b. Pair/group discussion

These were popular because useful, although opinions were much qualified:

'it depends on partners', 'sometimes this doesn't go smoothly with Japanese students', 'if the topic is silly it is not so useful', 'classroom topics are often difficult for us' (=Japanese), 'it is ...difficult if the partner is older, European, knows more', 'X is very strong, aggressive...I don't like to work with him, he doesn't listen to me'.

c. Projects

Project work involves going out of the classroom to interact with native speakers by, for example, conducting a survey. The material is prepared in the classroom beforehand in pairs or groups, and the outside work is usually but not always carried out by a pair - occasionally by an individual.

These are 'troublesome but useful' as they are a 'chance to meet native speakers' but they are 'better with a partner'.

Perhaps projects have a marginally coercive element - if you are to obtain the information, then you have no choice but to ask the questions.

d. Language Laboratory

Other activities, intermediate in popularity, are not discussed here.

Unpopular

Sequencing

In this activity, students in a group are each given a part of a text or one of a sequence of pictures. By reading out their text or describing their pictures the group must get the parts into the correct sequence. This can make demands on them in the areas of pronunciation (reading aloud), describing scenes or activities and listening intently.

They perhaps not unreasonably found this uninteresting, difficult, frustrating, not related to daily life. An activity like this may make more sense in a non-(native)-English-speaking environment, to provide a variety of stimulus, and less when the students are living in a target-language country with a vast range of natural language encounters available. Students might also be more responsive to such a task if a pedagogical justification for it were offered beforehand.

5. Summary

One way of further summarising and classifying responses would be:

Positive	**Negative**
useful	not useful
coercive	difficult
good for me (if nerve-wracking)	Euro-Japanese contrast/conflict?
free to choose own words	
need to think	

In other words, usefulness and coercion seem to be two primary concerns. The coercive elements may permit the students to override their tendency to defer to others in pair or group work; in the seminar, it is your duty to others to talk when it is your turn.

6. Suggestions

Although the data does not lead directly to any course of action, several possibilities are suggested by a) the investigation b) our reading and c) our ongoing experience as directors of and teachers on courses for Japanese students.

1. Explicit teaching/ role-playing of appropriate interactional patterns. One solution might be to make the conversational/interactional rules of engagement of the different cultures a part of the classroom input. O'Brien (1985:75-76) suggests that:

> An instructor cannot possibly teach *all* the varieties and social functions of a foreign language, but s/he *can* and should ensure a sense of the ...potential areas of misinterpretation. Awareness, even more than correctness, will help the L2 learner ...and prepare him for conversational encounters.

2. Make our expectations more explicit - if Japanese students do not wish to stand out in any way, and wish to be told exactly what to do, then we can tell them that, in our classrooms, *not* to speak is to be unusual. Sato suggests:

> Because Asian students may be more dependent upon teachers for opportunities to talk, clarification by teachers of the appropriateness of ...self-selection may be helpful. In other words, explicit suggestions could be made as to the conduct of classroom discourse, particularly when the teachers themselves expect a more egalitarian distribution of talk to prevail. (Sato 1986:116)

3. Reading skills development to break the reliance on *yakudoku*, and thus add to their vocabulary and confidence through greater/increased reading.

4. Focus on more 'coercive' activities to provide students with security, and to satisfy their learning expectations as they adapt to our very different (teaching) style/system, although this would have to be in the interests of all, not just the linguistic group.

5. Change our expectations of our students and ourselves in speaking classes. Perhaps we need to be more aware of *all* students' need for silence and reflection, even in a speaking class; a higher percentage of receptive activities might lead ultimately to more and better speaking by all, not only Japanese students.

7. Conclusion

As practising teachers we feel the data to be instructive, and believe the suggestions above worthy of trial and investigation. It may be, however, that in our search for 'causes of and solutions to' the reticence of many of our Japanese students, we are to some extent misinterpreting their problems, and ours. Only a minority of the students interviewed said that speaking was a priority for them; and data presented in a recent seminar (19 January 1996) at IALS, based on research into learners' and teachers' perceptions of Speaking classes, (Fraser, Gilroy and Parkinson, 1996) suggests that the *students* in these classes are on the whole satisfied - it is the *teachers* who are not. Student satisfaction does not of course equate to student progress or performance, but this discrepancy may indicate that teacher anxiety leads to overestimation of student problems. Anxious to have an active role, and to give 'value for money', *teachers* may feel that silences in a Speaking class are unacceptable, while the students in fact do not. One learning style to which teachers may need to adapt is 'silence in the speaking class'.

Note: This project was devised and carried out by both E. Dwyer and A. Heller-Murphy, but E. Dwyer is responsible for the text.

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Appendix

Japanese Research

Interview Schedule

Student's name _____

Nationality _____ Age _____ Sex _____

Date of arrival at IALS _____ Interview Date _____

Cloze score: entry _____ leaving _____

Interview grade: entry _____ interview _____

Interviewer _____

Question guidelines

Preamble

We are interested in finding out Japanese students' opinions about classroom speaking activities. Would you help us by answering some questions? This will take about 30 minutes/1 hour.

Learning English in Japan

1 Age at start? _____

2 Why did you decide to continue? _____

3 Did you speak much English in Japan? _____
If not, why not? _____

Edinburgh

1 Why did you decide to come here?

2 ***How important is speaking English to you compared to listening, reading, writing?***

3 ***How much do you think your spoken English has improved?***

4 ***How does your progress compare with what you expected?***

IMPROVEMENT				
5	4	3	2	1

AS EXPECTED				
5	4	3	2	1

a What has helped you to improve your speaking?

b What do you think has prevented you from improving as much as you expected?

c What did you yourself do to improve your speaking?

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1 Physical: Do you feel uncomfortable in any way when trying to deal with spoken English?

articulation
eye contact
proxemics
gesture
intonation/voice range

UNCOMFORTABLE				
5	4	3	2	1

2 Teaching context

What about the classroom - what did you expect to find there and how have you felt about any differences between practices here and in Japan?

	LIKED				
	5	4	3	2	1
the teacher: perceived use of authority (include: TTT, non-T-centred class)					
mobility (include: sitting on desks, crouching, 'diving')					
noise (include: laughter, silence, not shouting, female voice pitch)					
group/pair work					
oral/aural focus (include: in non-fluency focussed classes)					
class size (does smallness of nos. leave Ss' feeling 'exposed'?)					
class mix (include: European/Japanese/Arab; mono-vs. multi-lingual)					

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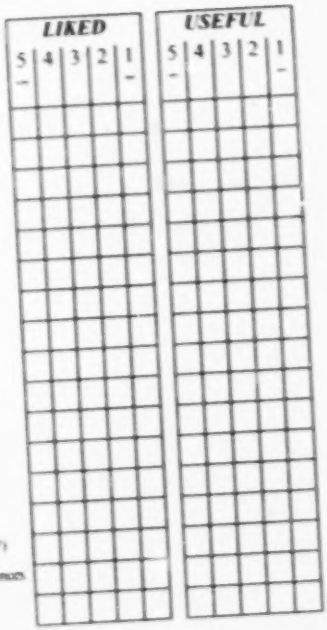
- **Activities**

Which activities do you remember doing in your afternoon classes?

Were there any classroom activities which you particularly (dis)liked or found useful? Why (easy or difficulty, surprising, inappropriate...etc.)?



role-play
scenario
drama
seminar
individual presentations/talks
pair/group discussions
debates
problem solving in groups
quizzes
surveys
projects outside the Institute
making a TV programme
making a radio programme
describe & draw
'games' - (include grammar/vocab games in non-fluency classes?)
sequences: working out the correct sequence of a set of pictures or sentences
language laboratory

4 **Yourself**

When you are speaking Japanese, would you say you are talkative?
Why is this?
(confident, shy, 'introvert')
Do you think your experiences here outside IALS have helped in any way?
Have you enjoyed staying with a family?

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